

ARGUMENT

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Only Washington Can Save the Renaissance Dam Negotiations Now

Since Ethiopia has hampered negotiations, Egypt needs the United States to preserve its access to the Nile.

By **Motaz Zahran**, the ambassador of Egypt to the United States.

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In early April, Ethiopia thwarted yet another mediation process, this time led by the African Union, to resolve an escalating crisis on the Nile—where Ethiopia is building the massive Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which would disrupt a primary source of water for Egypt and Sudan. The negotiations represented what the Egyptian foreign ministry called Ethiopia's "last chance" at a resolution to the dispute, which has been ongoing for 10 years.

With Ethiopia edging closer to unilaterally filling the dam's reservoir for a second time—

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The Biden administration, which is currently mulling over the best policy for managing this situation, must act now. At stake is the future of the Nile, a lifeline for millions of Egyptians and Sudanese. In 2011, without consulting either of its neighbors downstream, Ethiopia began constructing a 509-foot-tall concrete dam—large enough for a reservoir that can store twice as much water as Lake Mead, the largest artificial reservoir in the United States—on the Blue Nile, a vital upstream portion of the Nile River.

If unilaterally filled and operated, the GERD could inflict incalculable socioeconomic and environmental harm downstream in Egypt and Sudan. Last year, flouting a 2015 treaty, Ethiopia started an initial filling of the dam. Now, balking at calls for an equitable resolution and consistent with its established policy of unilaterally exploiting of international rivers, Ethiopia is vowing to press ahead with a second substantial phase of reservoir filling this summer.

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The threat the GERD poses is not hypothetical but real.

Choking off an essential supply of water would exponentially increase the dangers posed by climate change in the region. As one of the most arid countries in the world, with less than one-sixteenth the amount of renewable water resources as Ethiopia, Egypt is already facing severe water shortages, largely because of rising temperatures and rising sea levels. In fact, Egyptians are currently living around 50 percent below the water-poverty line, and with very little annual rainfall, the country is almost entirely dependent on the Nile for renewable water. To manage such conditions, Egypt has adopted a nationwide system of reusing water several times for agriculture, achieving one of the world's highest overall irrigation system efficiencies.

filling and operation of Ethiopia's dam would quickly make matters far worse for both Egypt and Sudan, causing serious environmental and socioeconomic damage, potentially forcing droves of families from their homes. Further, the GERD would also have deleterious effects on Egypt's Aswan High Dam, a multipurpose dam, which is the biggest source of renewable energy in Egypt and is indispensable in securing the water needs of Egypt and Sudan. The United Nations notes that every 2 percent drop in available water impacts 1 million people.

An impact study, conducted by the reputable Dutch firm Deltares, found that unilateral filling of the GERD could lead to a water shortage in Egypt of more than 123 billion cubic meters, and that in the agricultural sector alone, every 1 billion cubic meter shortage of water caused by unilateral filling or operation of the GERD, would result in forcing 290,000 people out of work, destroying more than 321,230 acres of cultivated land, an increase of \$150 million in food imports, and a loss of \$430 million of agricultural production.

The threat the GERD poses is not hypothetical but real. Right now, another dam built by Ethiopia is causing enormous harm in Kenya. The fallout is so severe that UNESCO warned of the extinction of Lake Turkana in Kenya. There has also been reporting and research on other Ethiopian unilateral actions, including in the Juba and Shabelle basin, without prior consultation with Somalia, and their significant negative impact on water access and security in Somalia.

The social and economic instability triggered by such unilateral policies could generate greater unrest in the region. And Ethiopia is stoking the flames by villainizing Sudan and Egypt by pushing the misleading populist narrative that attempts to characterize any and all concerns about the GERD as being rooted in colonialism, claiming that its downstream neighbors are against Ethiopia's development and are trying to impose upon Ethiopia "colonial treaties."

The situation as it stands today was entirely avoidable.

This mischaracterization is designed to allow Ethiopia to divert attention from its actual international legal obligations toward its downstream neighbors, which include

sovereign independent state—including in 1902, 1993, and 2015. These treaties served and continue to serve Ethiopia's national interests, including, for example, in relation to its borders. Nonetheless, while Ethiopia has reaped the benefits from signing these treaties, it repeatedly attempted to shirk its obligations related to the Nile River under the very same treaties.

The situation as it stands today was entirely avoidable. A viable solution has been on the table. In 2019, following a decade of adamantly rejecting any kind of agreement, much less the participation of any mediators or observers, Ethiopia finally accepted the participation and input of Washington and the World Bank in the process. The three countries were on the verge of signing an equitable agreement, a compromise deal inspired by the successful model of cooperation governing the Senegal River Basin. But at the eleventh hour, Ethiopia abruptly backed out and claimed that the proposed agreement deprived Ethiopia from its right to generate electricity efficiently from the GERD or undergo future projects, and that it tried to impose water shares to which Ethiopia does not subscribe.

Contrary to Ethiopian claims, this compromise deal assured Ethiopia that it will generate hydropower from the GERD sustainably at optimum levels, in all hydrological conditions, while protecting the downstream countries from ravaging droughts. It unambiguously stipulated that it is not a water-allocation agreement, clearly recognized Ethiopia's right to undertake future projects on the Blue Nile in accordance with applicable international law, and allowed the parties to revisit the agreement in 10 years.

Today, one year later, negotiations are still faltering under the auspices of the African Union, and Ethiopia's statements have now disclosed the actual reason it abandoned the Washington talks: Ethiopia rejects any legally binding agreement on the rules of filling and operation of its new dam, demanding a framework of nonbinding guidelines that it could alter at its whim. This is in contradiction with the 2015 Agreement on Declaration of Principles among the three countries.

Even though Ethiopia's political statements speak to its commitment to the African Union-led mediation process, invoking the shared principle "African solutions for African problems," Ethiopia's actions clearly undermine, in effect, the role of the African Union. This has been evidenced by Ethiopia's categorical rejection, in the most recent meeting in

prefers a nominal role for the chairperson at the African Union rather than an active role.

A new era of stability and shared economic prosperity is on the horizon in Africa and the Middle East, due in large part to the steady leadership of the United States. One example of the welcome changes sweeping through the region is the recent U.S.-brokered normalization agreements between Israel and a number of Arab states, which was reminiscent of Egypt's trailblazing treaty with Israel—also mediated by the United States—more than 40 years ago.

Through principled diplomacy, the Biden administration can reset the faltering negotiations.

The United States has the leverage needed to successfully encourage Ethiopia to engage in good faith in the GERD negotiations and to refrain from unilateral actions and the pursuit of narrow self-interests, which have been detrimental to its neighbors' legitimate interests. Soliciting expertise from international partners, including the United Nations, the European Union, and the United States, in support of the African Union-led mediation process would be invaluable in bringing the negotiations to fruition as soon as possible.

This proposal would also ensure there's no room to falsely point fingers; it would not be feasible to challenge the impartiality of all these partners led by the chairperson of the African Union, the way Ethiopia did with U.S. President Donald Trump's administration after Ethiopia abandoned the U.S.-led mediation process last year.

History shows that progress along the Nile can be fragile, and a single dispute can have harmful ripple effects that destabilize the region and reach our allies in the West. Failing to resolve the rapidly escalating issue over the GERD would accelerate the already devastating impacts of climate change in the area, unleash a wave of illegal migration to the West, and open the door to new conflicts and even terrorism in the Middle East and East Africa.

Through principled diplomacy, the Biden administration can reset the faltering negotiations, bring about an equitable solution for all parties, and, in doing so, ultimately safeguard its strategic interests with three important regional allies.

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